“The Field of the ‘Photographable’”: From the Global North to the Global South and from the Global South to the Global North. Visual Approaches, Appropriation and Flows in Africa

CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

Addis Ababa, French Center for Ethiopian Studies, April 21-22 2020 (Ethiopia)

In partnership with IFRA-Nairobi in Kenya, IRIS in Paris (France) (Interdisciplinary Research Institute for Social Issues, EHESS/CNRS/Inserm/University Sorbonne Paris North) and the Ethio-French Alliance in Addis-Ababa.

This 2 days-activities (a workshop, a forum, a conference) aim to offer a platform to discuss how photographers and researchers make use of photography to account for social realities they are not part of, which is often the case when it comes to photography in Africa. Firstly, it will provide space to study photographs of Africa as well as the vision their photographers have of their work and confront them to the vision of photographers and researchers who work on their own sociocultural milieus. Secondly, its objective is to account for the ways in which these photographs are received, whether in the locations where they were taken or in other locations (notably in the places where their photographs originate from).

This workshop addresses academics, photographers and students interested in conducting empirical and theoretical projects in the fields of visual sociology, visual anthropology, visual culture studies, journalism & digital media on contemporary African realities and Beyond.

This call covers 3 different events that you can apply for as a researcher or as a photographer:

- **DAY 1**: A practical and theoretical session at the crossroad of research and photography, that has been thought as a workshop where academics can be taken through a visual journey by photographers and researchers through the city of Addis-Abeba. (21th April 2020)
- **DAY 1**: A roundtable bringing all stakeholders during a forum at Alliance Ethio-Française of Addis-Abeba (21th April 2020).
- **DAY 2**: An academic forum where researchers using visual methods will present and discuss their research during a reflexive debate with photographers — and a greater audience —on the themes of the conference (notably “Work in images and Images of Work” & “Space in images”) at the French Center for Ethiopian Studies, Addis Abeba (22 April 2020).

1. See details for submission below.
Rationale

According to the principles of classic ethnographic methodologies, researchers had to observe social and cultural spaces initially entirely foreign to them. The difficulties encountered while conducting fieldwork as well as the uneasy position of a researcher out of place have long been thought of as a necessary rite of passage in order to become a ‘real researcher’ (Barley, 1983). The anthropologists investigate ‘exotic fieldworks’ as well as the sociologists, who observe a working class they were rarely part of (for instance: Halbwachs’ photographic work; Topalov, 1997). Many studies (Mauger, 1991; Bourdieu, 1993; Clair, 2016) discussed these specific experiences that shaped the researcher’s knowledge and know-how set in particular relations of power between the dominant and the dominated —whether those under study are dominant (cf. Payet, Rostaing, Giuliani, 2010) or dominated (cf. Chamboredon et al., 1994).

This epistemological reflection took a new turn with the post-colonial studies as they invite researchers of the South as well as the ‘subaltern’ voices to establish their own paradigms, taking some distance from the Western intellectual legacy. Post-colonial studies themselves, however, result from the circulations of individuals and ideas, and notably of researchers said to be ‘in-between’ (Brisson, 2018). While keeping in mind the existence of relations of power within academia as well as during field work, we would like to put forward the hypothesis that the flow of perspectives is at the very core of scientific innovation.

Visual methods freeze the ‘field of the photographable’ of the photographer/researcher, which is why they crystallize observations and consequently sharply highlight how much viewpoints depend on the positionality of the photographer/researcher. According to Bourdieu, the ‘field of the photographable’ is defined as: “the range which suggests itself as really photographable for a given social class (that is, the range of ‘takeable’ photographs or photographs ‘to be taken’, as opposed to the universe of the realities which are objectively photographable given the technical possibilities of the camera) [It] is defined by implicit models which may be understood via photographic practice and its product, because they objectively determine the meaning which a group confers upon the photographic act as the ontological choice of an object which is perceived as worthy of being photographed, which is captured, stored, communicated, shown and admired” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 6). These models are the products of socialization and of the ways in which photographers relate to their objects/models. They are less than static as they follow the life trajectories and/or life-courses of individuals and their circulations. The field of the ‘photographable’ nevertheless remains deeply influenced by inherited iconographic representations (Meyer Gouilhers, Hummel, Kimber, Radu, Riom, 2019) as well as the familiarity of and appeal for topics considered ‘exotic’ and ‘spectacular’, all being harnessed to the spaces within which the photographer-researcher has been socialized.

This two-day workshop thus aims to compare perspectives and analyze how various conceptions of what the ‘field of the photographable’ is or should be circulate:
What image of the ‘South’ do researchers and photographers from the North tend to convey? And what are the images that researchers and photographers of the South have of their homeland? To what extent do the perspectives of an outsider or of an insider differ? While we consider the North/South division heuristic, this workshop is an attempt at questioning also circulations and their effects on the visual work of researchers who belong to different spaces.

On the other hand, comparing ‘fields of the photographable’ may also require using a typology of gazes, from the ordinary gaze of the general public to that of the models. In this case, we shall discuss how photographs are received as well as the ‘misunderstandings’ they are bringing up (Papinot, 2007). This would make sense particularly in the photo-elicitation method, where the interviewees’ comments on the pictures (Collier, 1967, Harper, 2002); in participatory photography; or when photographs are exhibited to a specific or greater audience. The perspective of the media is also relevant to tackle—since the media have the power to select pictures, to choose the angle of a topic, and lastly to define the ‘photographable’ as well as what is ‘showable’ (or not). As regulators of ‘what is legitimate’, the media act as key intermediaries between producers (photographers and researchers) and the way photographs are being received.

At last, from a methodological perspective, speakers will be invited to consider and discuss interdisciplinary collaborations between researchers from different geographical areas, or between photographers and researchers from the social sciences. How do different perspectives from different disciplines travel, meet, and intersect within a common research project? How do teams manage to come to an agreement? What kind of images result from negotiations between team members?

Abstracts are expected to use one or more of the three above-mentioned perspectives on comparing the ‘photographable’ in/on Africa to address one of the two following topics:

a. Work in images and images of work

While both photographers and researchers in the social sciences have long used visual perspectives to study labor (cf. see in France for instance, the scientific journal ‘Travail des images, Images du travail’ (Work in Pictures, Pictures of Work), the Poitiers festival of films related to work, etc.), studies of labor in Africa has been sidelined since the end of 1990’s. Observing that research on workers in Africa has been dwindling, Jean Copans (2004) points out that “precariousness, unemployment and non-work related activities” have become recurring topics.

Yet, labor has been put back to the fore by actual studies focusing on various fields, such as forestry workers in Gabon (Bourel, 2016), workers in horticultural greenhouses (Calas, Racaud, et al. 2017), tea and sugar plantations in Kenya (Josse-Durand, forecoming), the workforce in large
Cameroonian plantations (Vadot, 2014), or labor in Ethiopia (forthcoming issue of the scientific journal “Annales d’Ethiopie” to appear in 2020). The thematic school on Working Africa held in France in May 2019 is another event symptomatic of this renewal (visit the official blog, also meant to host images related to this research: https://afriquesouvrieres.hypotheses.org/). In this context, visual approaches of labor in Africa are progressively (re-)emerging as well.

How do researchers address the evolutions of work in Africa from a visual angle? What type of perspective are developed by Westerners, who are obsessed with issues such as the centrality of work in people’s lives and the changes in the ways in which people relate to work (Méda, 1995; Rifkin, 1995); or with the growth of jobs that result from waves of industrialization specific to Africa? What images are favored by African photographers or researchers who attend these changes? Finally, how do the audience, and the workers portrayed in particular, react to such photographs depicting either their own work or the work of others?

b. Space in images

Geographers, urban planners and architects have long used visual approaches, probably due to the traditions of their fields and their necessity to address space in their studies (Meyer, Maresca, 2016). The Chicago School, who developed qualitative fieldwork methods in Urban Sociology, also made use of photographs, yet only in an illustrative way (cf. Anderson, 1923; Thrasher, 1927).

The explicit use of photographs as a tool to collect or build up data in research is a recent development (Conord, Cuny, 2014) particularly employed to account for urban changes and remnants of collective memory - like documenting immigration through pictures of furnished hotels in town (Barrère, Levy-Vroelant, 2014).

Photo-elicitation has also used images in order to better understand personal ways to relate to space. Photography then offers an opportunity to identify what makes sense for the interviewees. This can be, for instance, about what is considered ‘clean’ and ‘dirty’ in cities (Guinchard, Havard, Ogorzelec, 2012), or the perception they have of their neighborhood (Shoepfer, 2014). While this method is based on discussion, taking pictures in the street can enable researchers to interact with passers-by and capture their ‘emic’ perspective.

What perceptions meet or confront in such cases? What kind of conflict about the ‘field of the photographable’ can arise between the ordinary perceptions of the users and that of photographers or researchers?

Bibliography

SUBMISSION

For abstracts submission (academic workshop):
Max. 3 500 signs, English. Please send your abstract by email to the following address: cperrinjoly@gmail.com; cjossedurand@ifra-nairobi.net

In parallel, an exhibition on Work in Africa will be held in the French Alliance in April 2020

For photographs submission (exhibition): please send 3 to 5 pictures with a paper presenting your approach (max 5000 signs).
Deadline for submission: February 28th, 2020

The event will be hosted by the French Centre for Ethiopian Studies (CFEE), a French Research Institute Abroad (IFRE) of the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs (MEAE) and the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS / INSHS). The CFEE is located in Addis-Ababa, Arada sub city, Kebele 11 /12, house n° 1907, in the JanMeda area, between Menelik hospital and Siddist Kilo.
Website: www.cfee.cnrs.fr
Blog: https://cfee.hypotheses.org/
Facebook Page: https://www.facebook.com/CFEE.Addis/

It will be organized in partnership with:

- IFRA-Nairobi in Kenya - an institute also part of the IFRE network and which covers research in East Africa. This call colludes with a current IFRA regional research program on Workers, Labour and Employment. See the detailed project online: http://ifra-nairobi.net/wp-content/uploads/WorkingAfricaProgramme_IFRA-Nairobi_2019-2020-1.pdf
  Website : http://ifra-nairobi.net/2801
  Facebook Page: https://www.facebook.com/IFRANairobi/
  Twitter account: @ifra-nairobi / https://twitter.com/ifranairobi?lang=en

  Website : http://iris.ehess.fr

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